

Morts pour la France: Things and memory in the ‘destroyed villages’ of Verdun

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Abstract

This article considers the power of things to affect how the past is remembered in the aftermath of mass violence, through the case of the ‘destroyed villages’ (*villages détruits*) of the battlefield of Verdun, theatre in 1916 of one of the most destructive battles of World War I. As well as causing mass military death, the battle also led to the ‘death’ of nine small villages, declared to have ‘died for France’ and incorporated into the post-war commemorative landscape of the battlefield. The article illustrates the 21st-century discourse and practices that surround the remains of these villages, from emplaced ruins to photographs and other documents. A century after the ‘death’ of the villages, people who identify as descendants of the original inhabitants gather at the sites and through these objects evoke their ancestors and the pre-war settlement, momentarily reconstituting a space that they can ‘inhabit’ physically, imaginatively and affectively. However, bids to restore a ‘village’ space and time are overwritten by the commemorative framework in which the sites and remains have been embedded for the past century, that identifies the ‘dead’ localities with the human Fallen and their history with the moment of their ‘death for France’. So, while the surviving traces of the former villages retain their power to affect and thus to evoke the pre-war, civilian past, their ability to produce a new memory for Verdun is limited by their incorporation into a memorial landscape dedicated to heroic military death for the nation. The physical expropriation of sites and vestiges during the post-war reconstruction of the battlefield and their preservation as tangible tokens of mass death has enduringly fixed and overdetermined their meaning, in a form of symbolic expropriation that limits their power to produce memory.

Keywords

landscape, memory, objects and memory, Verdun battlefield, war

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Introduction

Through the violence of war, things are destroyed, damaged, lost or displaced but, in war's aftermath, objects that have survived can also be salvaged, preserved and 're-emplaced' as part of the reconstruction of material environments. This can be simple recycling or reusing of things in the interests of practicality and economy, but can also have symbolic motivations, insofar as post-war reconstruction is a means to construct a narrative about the past for the present and future (Sørensen and Viejo-Rose, 2015; Viejo-Rose, 2011). The role of war-damaged objects in post-war reconstruction and, in particular, in post-war memorialization, is the topic of this article. Its focus is on the post-war afterlife of the remains of some villages in the uplands of Verdun (France), destroyed during one of the most brutal battles in history and preserved as memorials to the battle. The article considers whether the physical durability of these remains and their ability to survive extreme violence are sufficient to enable them to link past and present across the hiatus of mass destruction and mass death, and to broaden the range of stories that can be told about the past, particularly in their humble everyday character, personal stories not included in the 'big' history. Its argument is that, while such objects retain their power to affect through their sensory qualities, their power to rewrite the past by restoring to it personal stories and memories is limited by their incorporation into a memorial space dedicated to public, national commemoration. At Verdun, the physical expropriation of the village sites and remains during post-war reconstruction of the battlefield and their preservation as tangible tokens of mass death within a landscape dedicated to the war dead enduringly fixed and overdetermined their meaning, corresponding to a form of symbolic expropriation that must be taken into account alongside their material survival in order to understand their impact in the present.

War, memory and the things that endure

The social theory of memory inaugurated by Maurice Halbwachs (1980[1950]) centres on the retrospective and ongoing revision and reconstruction of the past to respond to and serve the social concerns of later times: social memory is only ever selective and 'discursive, intentional and instrumentalist' (Van Dyke, 2019: 213). This model has been criticized as functionalist because it casts the past as a figment of the present's imagination that is shaped and reshaped to serve present needs (Shaw, 2002: 12–13). An alternative model envisages a two-way relationship between past and present by highlighting the materiality of the past which enables it to endure into later times in non-discursive ways and shape present perceptions (p. 15 and *passim*). At the core of this model is the insight that human action occurs through the body and thus relies on non-discursive processes and means, from habitual actions to landscapes and things, which have the capacity to endure into later times regardless of whether they conform to current social needs or perceptions (see Connerton, 1989; Shaw, 2002). In the case of things, Olsen (2003, 2010) argues that as durable matter they are not 'incomplete representations of the past' but *parts* of the past that by enduring into later times 'hybridiz[e] periods and epochs' in the sense that they reveal the multitemporality of each present (Olsen 2003: 90, 2008: 108–109; see Van Dyke, 2019).

The ability of things to conjoin past and present also resides in their sensory qualities that elicit affective responses (Harvey and Knox, 2014: 11). Through this, they can make the past affectively present: as Harries (2017: 125–126) writes, touching things from the past can help to feel its immanence in the present: ‘the geometrical time of historical narrative . . . crumples like an old handkerchief’ – at a touch, the past seeps into the present. This leads Harries to argue that memory should not be treated as encoded in objects, instead material things and the material world should be apprehended *as* memory, and memory, reciprocally, as a dimension of our ongoing embodied engagement with the world (Harries, 2017: 126; see also Curtoni et al., 2003; Van Dyke, 2019). A similar point is made in phenomenological theories of landscape that highlight the timefulness of the mutual implication of people and spaces (e.g. Ingold, 1993; Tilley, 1994). The role of encounters with physical surroundings in producing memory is also theorized by Bloch (1998), who draws on cognitive science to argue that sensations and affects generated by spaces and things associated with narratives about the past give rise to images of the past that are closer to direct, first-hand memory than to knowledge acquired indirectly through written or oral texts. Overall, in relation to their physicality and ability to endure across time, things are identified not just as repositories for memory but as means of memory insofar as they mediate between inner, subjective experiences and social, shared pasts (Sturken, 1997: 5).

But what about the relationship between the ability of things to endure through time and the malleability of memory, in the case of war and of things that survive extreme violence, mass destruction and mass death? Can such things bring the past into the present in the way described? Arguably, war causes the material world to become less fixed and enduring, as violence and destruction overturn it and also people’s embodied relationship with it; but this can paradoxically make the material more central to memory. For example, during the First World War, the devastation caused by new armaments did not just obliterate physical surroundings and landmarks but also, at a deeper level, destabilized habitual boundaries between body and material world. Combatants experienced a ‘world of metals’ designed to inflict shocking, unprecedented damage on bodies and land (Saunders, 2003: 72–74); and especially on the Western Front, also a ‘world of mud’ forming a dangerous, treacherous, filthy ‘slimescape’ of soil, organic and inorganic waste, industrial debris, animal and even human flesh (Das, 2005: 35). The testimonies analysed by Das suggest that many soldiers felt this mud to be malevolently active, trespassing the distinction between subject and object (p. 45) while Wilson (2012: 171 ff) describes how soldiers’ personhood was shaped by a complex psychological and physical intimacy with the metallic materials of war. Faced with this new ‘world’ of sensations, both combatants and non-combatants famously struggled to comprehend and describe the experience of war and represent and name the devastation wrought by the new armaments on bodies and landscapes (e.g. Sherman, 1999: 13 ff). Thus, the violent overturning of the material world overturned or challenged the possibility of representation; however, paradoxically, the possibility of representing this event in/as a memory drew on material means.

Material things can precisely play a role in indexing memories of experiences that are not easy to put into words, such as violent, traumatic ones (Harvey and Knox, 2014: 11). For example, things that have survived through extreme violence and destruction can

themselves be regarded and treated as ‘witnesses’ to these (Filippucci, 2017) and even act as proxies for the people who went through them, on a ‘continuum’ with their bodily remains, as in the case of the belongings of concentration camp inmates, now held and displayed in ‘memorial museums’ (Williams, 2007: 38). Such objects can also enable people to feel a more direct connection with the past and with the dead than monuments and even bodies themselves (Renshaw, 2011: 156 ff). In the case of the First World War, too, both during and after the war people resorted to material things in creating memory of and from the violence of the battlefields. Both personal possessions of the dead and war debris (crafted into so-called ‘trench art’) helped survivors to remember and mourn especially those buried in battlefields away from home or whose bodies were missing (Saunders, 2003: 153–154). Old and new forms of material culture also played a role: both on and off the former battlefields, monuments not only commemorated the dead but also arguably made them physically present and available for mourning, indexing and lending substance and integrity to the missing bodies (cenotaphs, monuments with lists of names) and to mangled, nameless bodies (ossuaries, tombs for the ‘unknown’ soldier) (e.g. Filippucci, forthcoming; Sherman, 1999; Winter, 1995). So, somewhat paradoxically, extreme physical destruction in the First World War intensified the memorial significance of material things and also of landscapes, such as the former Western Front, where a combination of burials, monuments and selectively preserved battlefield ruins and remains turned the reconstructed environment into a large memorial artefact that helped to give a tangible focus or home to the horror, pain and grief (Lloyd, 1998; Saunders, 2001). What is the impact of such a scenario on the ability of things to embody the past and contribute to the formation of memory? Do things in settings whose materiality is so intrinsically linked with destruction (and indeed constituted in response to it) retain the ability to embody the durability of the past and to transform and enhance the temporality of the present? The relationship between materiality and memory in a context of violent destruction and reconstruction is examined in the rest of this article through the case of the ‘destroyed villages’ within the former battlefield of Verdun.

Things that have endured at Verdun

The battle between German and French troops for the fortified city of Verdun in 1916 was one of the most destructive and deadly in the First World War, due to its length (10 months) and the concentrated use of heavy artillery on a relatively small area in the uplands north of the city (e.g. Horne, 1993). After the war, a perimeter of some 9,000 hectares of former farmland was expropriated by the French state and reconstructed as woodland dedicated to the war dead, excluding in perpetuity any ordinary habitation or economic exploitation apart from forestry management (Amat, 2015: 431 ff). This contrasted with other parts of the war zone, where land was restored to habitation and cultivation (e.g. Clout, 1996). The decision not to restore the Verdun battlefield to its pre-war state was in part economic: unlike in other areas of the former war zone, the market value of land in the Verdun uplands was lower than the cost of clearing and reclaiming it (Clout, 1996: 12, 37, 155). However, the decision was also motivated symbolically and ideologically, insofar as Verdun came to be seen as France’s greatest and most emblematic victory of the war (Ousby, 2003; Prost, 2002). The land was consecrated to the French¹ war dead, both those

whose remains could be buried in individual graves in the national cemetery or collected in a central Ossuary, and the missing, whose last resting place was understood to be the landscape itself. Thus post-war debates about the transformation of the area into a forest highlighted the idea that trees and managed greenery would constitute an appropriate environment for respectfully honouring and remembering all the dead, including those with no known burial (Amat, 2015: 431 ff). Thus, arguably, the post-war landscape of the battlefield was not just a means for commemorating the battle and its victims in the abstract, but a concrete, material means for the proper disposal of the dead responding to the unprecedented number and manner of death. The reconstructed landscape also tangibly embodied a political memory of the battle as a supreme example of French heroism and heroic resistance, through preserving selected ruins of the battlefield and of the pre-existing landscape. This included some of the military structures, listed as historic monuments, and the remains of nine small villages destroyed during the battle, officially counted among the fallen by being awarded military medals (*Croix de Guerre*) and declared to 'have died for France' (*Morts pour la France*).

The ruins and sites of the former villages are the only tangible testimonies of the pre-war landscape that were preserved within the battlefield perimeter. As the text accompanying their medals suggests, their remains were kept as mementoes of the battle, specifically as evidence of the enemy's barbarous violence and of the heroic resistance of the 'Soldier of Verdun'. The village sites were incorporated into the memorial landscape by a law of 1919 that perpetuated them institutionally by reinstating a mayor and municipal council, but no inhabitants. The villagers had left in a semi-organized evacuation as frontline combat approached between 1914 and 1916, scattering across the region and France and, although some of them attempted to return after the armistice, they were cautioned away (e.g. Laparra and Laparra, 2006). Since 1919, the municipal officials, initially the pre-war incumbents and later state-nominated ones, held and hold the purely ceremonial role of maintaining the *souvenir de la localité* (memory of the locality) (p. 116). Until recently, this has consisted mainly of presiding over annual ceremonies held on the feast of the former village's patron saint at the memorial chapel and war memorial to the parish war dead, built in the inter-war period at each village site. Interwar images show large crowds attending the ceremonies; by 2005, when I began my fieldwork, only some 100 people attended each time. These include public officials and members of the general public but also, in a majority, people who identify as *descendants* of the original inhabitants. As I go on to discuss, in the 21st century, *descendants* and mayors do not just attend the ceremonies but also carry out other kinds of memory work at the village sites, centred on the material remains of the pre-war village that have survived the battle both in situ and beyond.

Détruits mais pas morts: The 'destroyed villages' in the 21st century

Standing in clearings in the Verdun forest, some of them quite remote from the main monumental area of the reconstructed battlefield, for most of the year the sites of the *village détruits* are utterly deserted, coming to life only on the date of the commemorative ceremony. However, as one mayor put it about 'his' village in 2005, they are 'destroyed

but not dead': he was commenting on a photograph of the gathering at a recent annual ceremony and pointing out those who are known today as the *descendants*, people who can trace a genealogical (kinship or affinal) link to the pre-1914 inhabitants. Especially since the last direct survivors of the pre-war villages passed away in the early 2000s, the villages' ongoing 'survival' is associated with their presence and activities. Being a *descendant* is also held to best qualify people to act as mayors or councillors, and many grumble when these roles are given to non-*descendants*; in fact non-*descendant* mayors usually claim indirect family links, such as the fact that a parent or grandparent had temporarily lived in one of the villages before the war and remembered it, or similar. Mayors also gain popular approval for their efforts in tracking down new *descendants* through archival, genealogical research and word-of-mouth. In fact, the mayors today present their core mission as building up and maintaining a network of *descendants* and the ceremonies' speeches often state that each village 'continues to live in the soul and heart' of those who attend; in particular, as one of my research participants put it 'the *descendants* who continue to meet are the soul of the village that continues'. This is not just rhetoric: for those who claim descent from the original villagers, meeting up at ceremonies leads to discovering (real or imagined) past kinship or neighbourhood ties and in a way to 'reenact' those through the encounters. For example, two women I met along the 'memorial path' of one of the villages explained that

At last year's ceremony we met our old neighbours, we talked a lot, we told one another a load of stories.

By 'our old neighbours', these speakers, two women in their 50s and 60s, referred to *descendants* of people who had been neighbours in their grandparents' generation in the pre-war village, to which the 'stories' also refer: like the villagers in Bloch's visit to a 50-year-old massacre site in Madagascar, they used the 'we' pronoun, blurring historical and autobiographical memory (Bloch, 1998: 119–120). For Bloch, this shift is made possible when people have and affirm a moral link with people in the past (such as kinship), but also when they can link a received account of the past with material objects and 'topography infused with history' (p. 20). So indeed the women told me this while standing by the remains of their grandparents' house in the former village, next to a sign displaying a cadastral map of the building and a period photograph of the family. These and other documents about the villages have been tracked down by *descendants* and mayors in recent years, both in public and family archives, and they are brought back to the village and shared each year during the annual gatherings, where they are the focus of lively interest and discussion.

In several of the villages' photos, maps, birth certificates and other documents have also been restored to the site in a more permanent way by being displayed along sign-posted 'memory trails' tracing the pre-war topography of the village. These are ostensibly aimed at tourists but, when they visit the site for the ceremonies, *descendants* usually walk them, either individually or as a group, especially when, as in the case of the two women mentioned, the location of 'their' house is marked. As well as information panels with photographs of places and people, maps and other documentation, the trails also display material remains of the village, or material traces that enable visitors to visualize

the footprint of the village. In a few cases, the ruins of buildings formerly covered by forest and vegetation have been cleared and sometimes partially excavated at the initiative of the mayor, sometimes with the help of *descendants*. In one village, household debris retrieved when the vestiges were exposed is displayed along the trail. Where the physical ruins remain buried or engulfed in vegetation, the footprints of houses have been marked by other means (e.g. patches of gravel or grass) and signs with house and/or family names affixed; street names have also been reaffixed to the main thoroughfares and public spaces.

According to my research participants, all this began towards the end of the 1990s with clearing the woodland that had covered the sites since the war:

'It had become like a jungle!' said a *descendant* in his 80s, who remembered how, as he was growing up in the 1930s 'nature had reclaimed its rights' very quickly across the battlefield. Another said that his great-grandfather 'used to go to see the ruins of his farm in the middle of the forest', while before the war 'there was no forest here, just farmland and a magnificent view' and, for this reason, his father, while serving as mayor, had got the forestry service in the 1990s to clear the village site.

As this last quote suggests, clearing the forest is understood in part as restoring memories transmitted by those who knew the village in the pre-war period, when woodland was confined to small patches and the villages commanded a view of the surrounding lowlands (Amat, 2015). The fact that these initiatives began in the 1990s perhaps responds to the gradual disappearance of those who had known the villages at first hand who began at this time to pass away or to be too old to attend the ceremonies. Arguably, it is in relation to this generational shift that the village sites have gone from being purely stages for commemorative ceremonies to venues where *descendants* can physically as well as imaginatively and affectively inhabit, and so tangibly produce memories of place.

'Walking in the village' today

When I spoke with the last surviving inhabitant of one of the villages in 2005, she told me with evident pride that when she left it in 1916, she was 18 months old and so she had actually 'walked in the village'. Sadly, this woman passed away shortly after our conversation; but, as described, from around the same time in most of the *villages détruits*, *descendants* and mayors were busy making it possible to 'walk' the space of the former villages by uncovering and making accessible their physical remains and footprint, complemented with other objects such as photographs and maps. Particularly visual media such as maps and photographs encourage visitors and *descendants* to revisit the pre-war village in their imagination as well as physically. For instance, a journalist who is the husband of a *descendant* has made an animated film of his wife's village by splicing together pre-war postcards and turning static views into a dynamic and immersive 'virtual tour' of the pre-war village which he has shared with other *descendants* online. People are also encouraged to visualize the former village through the placement of images of former inhabitants and buildings at the actual village site, for instance at the location of former houses. In a particularly suggestive case, life-size photographs of

former inhabitants placed within the ruined walls of their houses and around the former streets visually repopulated the deserted and ruined spaces. The promoter of this last initiative also photographed his wife and other *descendants* next to their ancestors' emplaced photos, producing sepia versions visually eliding the distinction between the generations. In each case there is an effort to make the former village space come back to life visually and imaginatively.

The link between current and past landscape is also made through comparing pre-war photographs with the remains visible today. Elsewhere I have argued that, in local villages reconstructed after the First World War, pre-war photographs assist efforts to reconstruct the pre-war builtscapes in memory and imagination (Filippucci, 2010). In the *villages détruits*, this reconstruction is more direct, as images of buildings and streets are immediately compared to their ruined sites by displaying them at or close to the very spots they depict. Objects found in the course of forest clearance or excavations are also kept in situ, e.g. collected inside the chapel or left where they were found; in one case, shattered fragments of plates, kitchen and other implements pieced together for display along the path were even more literally kept in situ by being cemented into concrete slabs dug into the ground. For the mayor of the village who did this, this was a security measure to stop them from being stolen, but it also very tangibly bound them back into the physical fabric of the ruined village. He also explained that, in excavating the village and exhibiting its remains along the memory trail, 'we try to bring back to light the remains of the village and the life of the inhabitants': for instance, pointing to a rusty pickaxe, he said 'it's not pretty, but you can see what the inhabitants used to use.' Next, however, referring to the way the tool was contorted and twisted, he added: 'you can see the force of the artillery shells.'

As this last comment indicates, unlike documents, maps and photos that survived the war because they were not in the villages or left them with the last inhabitants, the war-damaged remains evoke different aspects of the past. The objects help *descendants* to visualize and reconstruct the peacetime 'life of the inhabitants' and to apprehend it affectively through materially encountering them in situ as well as through their role as catalysts for bodily/social encounters between *descendants* at the sites. However, the damaged state of some of the objects can also bring to mind the violence inflicted on these places, arguably more easily '*shown . . . than narrated*' (Das, 2007: 10). This is both the direct violence of the battle on bodies and land, and the more indirect violence of the war on those who were displaced and suffered loss and harm not just through losing loved ones in the war, but also their property and their home places:

At a ceremony, a man pointed to a group standing by – 'they are from the L. family: later they'll go down the memory trail to gather themselves [*se recueillir*] at the ruins of their house.'

The use of the verb *se recueillir* in French refers to silent contemplation or homage at a grave (Oxford-Hachette, 1997: 685). In using this verb, the speaker associates the visit to the house remains with a loss: most obviously, that of the ancestors who once lived here, but also perhaps the loss of property and place, recalling the misery of those who returned to find their house in ruins after the war, still narrated in some local families, and documented historically (Audoin-Rouzeau, 2003). A sense of loss for ancestral connections

and place roots is also expressed and addressed through the remains of village cemeteries. These were mostly destroyed or heavily damaged by the artillery bombardment and, in some villages, post-war memorials to the destroyed or lost *graves* were erected. The inscriptions on such monuments suggest that this particular loss may have compounded survivors' experience of displacement:

'To all our dear departed whose graves were destroyed during the war 1914–8, the inhabitants of Ornes dispersed, piously faithful. RIP.'

'The parish of Bézonvaux in memory of those deceased whose graves were destroyed and of those who died in exile during the war 1914–8.'

The loss of ancestral burials is recognized and remains poignant today: in one village, during the annual ceremony, a wreath is posed at the monument for the lost graves in the name of 'those *descendants* who can no longer find their family graves'; in another, the scattered fragments of broken headstones have been gathered at the foot of the cross commemorating the lost graves, as if to preserve them from further oblivion. Alternatively, war damaged remains are interpreted as evidence of resilience and survival:

At Ornes, a large wooden cross stands next to the chapel. The mayor explains that it is relatively new, but the original 'had been there since before 1914!'. The original, a worn stump, rests on the ground along the wall of the chapel. Pointing to dents in the wood he says 'those are the marks of shell fragments – she² has done the whole war of 1914, that one – maybe not 'done', but she has survived it!'.

The cross 'has done the whole war' like a Verdun veteran, but the idea of making it through mass destruction also has a more local resonance with interwar claims about the 'tenacity' of displaced rural populations of the devastated areas in their determination to return and reclaim their lands, which still finds an echo in local narratives of identity today (Clout, 1996: 28; Filippucci, 2010). This aspect of the past also emerges in comments about the post-war features of the village sites: for instance, on showing me the chapel, an informant related his grandfather's complaint that 'they were called chapels because the state didn't want to reconstruct [anything], not even churches'. Another stated that in defining the 'Red Zone' (the part of the war zone that was expropriated) the State 'just drew a line all around', implying that it was done without regard for the pre-war inhabited and cultivated landscape. Many also complained about the post-war management of the village sites by the state agencies in charge of them since 1919, such as the National Forestry Agency, accused of damaging and destroying the surviving vestiges of villages during forestry works; and the Highways Agency, criticized for neglecting the roads that lead to the villages, making access difficult and, in some cases, preventing people from visiting.

These comments point to the harm that the violence of war inflicted on the local civilian population both directly, by destroying their property, and indirectly, by leading to expropriation and displacement. They show that the encounter with the war-damaged remains of the villages does not only trigger a nostalgic memory of the pre-war village among *descendants*, nor indeed passive (e.g. traumatic) repetition or inability to find

meaning in a violent past. Instead, it leads *descendants* to give voice to ancestors' discontent at the destruction and especially at the state's decision to prevent reconstruction, documented in some of the published village histories (Laparra and Laparra, 2006). As such, the remains arguably allow *descendants* to 'constructively engage' with the past, in Argenti's sense that they formulate a moral and political judgement on what happened (Argenti and Schramm, 2010: 19). *Descendants* reveal the moral basis of their memory work at the village sites when they explain that they attend the ceremonies 'for' their distant ancestors, or 'for' parents or grandparents who can no longer attend because of age, illness or death. Many also explain their interest and commitment to the village by referring to their elders' silence about it, or to the fact that they never wanted to return, in each case 'because they had suffered too much'. Such comments present caring for the village site and remains today as dutiful acts of acknowledging and answering to suffering and loss in each family's past (see Kidron, 2010).

Thus, the damaged remains of the village help *descendants* to remember in the sense of evoking and reinhabiting imaginatively the once-living village, but also in the sense of giving voice to their elders' painful silences at having to abandon and lose their places, expressing a 'grievous loss' that even a century later causes resentment, if not directly then on behalf of the direct survivors (Feuchtwang, 2011: 8). The physical remains marking the sites of the former villages and the sites themselves provide a tangible focus and trigger for these feelings and memories. Their power to do so resides perhaps in their durability. Both the things that survived the violence and destruction of war by leaving the villages with their former inhabitants, such as photographs, and the things that survived in situ, having borne (and maybe now bear witness to) the damage, may in their durability be particularly well suited to bring to mind the lingering, unfinished business of the past, the stories not yet fully told or resolved (Argenti, 2007). In this case, this is the story of the loss of homes and land, and of the discontent and harm at being forced away and, in this case, not being allowed to return and reconstruct. This story was relatively little told at the time, overshadowed by the greater losses and harm of the war, and continues to be less known today (Clout, 1996).

By uncovering, gathering, recomposing, protecting and consolidating things left behind and restoring to the sites some of the things that had been taken away and which have made it through the war and the century (such as photographs, names and stories), *descendants* arguably address and work on this unfinished business, resurrecting old relationships, affirming continuity and expressing grievance and grief. Theirs could be seen as a reconstruction of sorts, alternative to that not carried out after the war. It is also a sort of archaeology, both in the sense that in some cases they literally expose remains that have remained buried for a century, but also because, like archaeologists, they are 'writing history from things' (González-Ruibal, 2012: 457). Through things uncovered in or restored to the villages, they deconstruct the post-war geography of these places that was created in response to the battle and to memorialize it (pp. 457, 471). Even though they belong to a past that is long gone, in their durable, sensory reality, these things elicit affective responses from *descendants* and enable them to feel connected with a distant past that they can claim as theirs to remember. Even though (or perhaps because) the people who 'walked in the villages' have disappeared, the objects enable people to produce heartfelt memories about the pre-war villages and their inhabitants and

about the losses caused to them by war. However, this affective reclaiming of the villages' past is not sufficient to redefine the meaning of these sites, due to their material and symbolic incorporation into a landscape that has 'died for France'.

Morts pour la France

Each year, the moment when *descendants* gather and, through their presence, encounters and conversations resurrect and enliven the memory of the pre-war villages, is also the moment of the commemorative ceremonies that remember the villages' deaths and translate their disappearance and the inhabitants' losses of their homes and home places into the symbolism of national loss. The ceremonies take place on the day of each village's patron saint, but the focus of discourse and action is the military victims and the figure of the fallen soldier against whose 'sacrifice' other losses and suffering are measured. So, in the symbolism of the ceremonies, there is a constant slippage between the death of villages and the suffering of villagers and those of the soldiers who fought and died here. The ceremonies start at the war memorial and follow the protocol of the Armistice Day ritual with the bugler playing 'To the Dead', the laying of wreaths and the reading of names of men of the parish who died in the war. The figure of the fallen soldiers is not just alluded to but embodied by veteran flag-bearers and sometimes re-enactors in period uniforms. The theme of soldierly sacrifice also dominates the speeches made by the village mayors and other local authorities, that routinely refer to 'the horror of the life of the *poilu*'³ and his endurance in 'unspeakable conditions', and refer to the destruction of the villages as an example of the 'endurance of an entire people' symbolized by the battle of Verdun, said to give the inhabitants' own losses 'a higher meaning' as one speech put it (speeches at Haumont and Bézonvaux, 2011). The theme of sacrifice is also elaborated through the Catholic Mass that usually follows. This may include prayers for the *descendants* and for civilian victims of war 'expelled from their homes'; but here too soldierly death is upheld as the most exemplary kind of sacrifice:

Nature has reclaimed its own here, and the ground is no longer red like blood, but green, like hope – because giving one's life for one another is the first duty of humanity. (Mass in Haumont, 2011)

The imagery of the blood-drenched soil in this quote points to a visceral identification of the ruined village with the fallen soldiers.⁴ In this case, for instance, the celebrant stated that the blood is now replaced by the healing 'green' of the forest but, as he did so, he held up his chasuble to show the green front concealing a red lining, visually conveying that one does not and cannot efface the other here. Alongside this symbolism, traceable to the war, in the 21st century, speeches and ceremonies also touch on the theme of peace and of 'Europe' as its guarantor. Both are more central to the national and international rhetoric of commemoration at Verdun since the second post-war, which has recast the battlefield as a site of 'Franco-German reconciliation' and, more lately, of European unity and world peace (Prost, 2002). In turn, this signals a global shift away from national memories towards a more 'cosmopolitan' memory of atrocity, that makes remembering them a universal ethical imperative and acknowledges the suffering of all victims of war,

not just military ones (Levy and Szneider, 2002; Winter and Prost, 2005: 209). This language can and does more easily allow the expression of civilian victimhood and losses in total war; however, it also deterritorializes memory, decoupling it from local and located history (Macdonald, 2009: 131–132). So, in this case, it overlooks the impact of the war on the former inhabitants of the area that became a battlefield.

The symbolic slippage between villages and soldiers is not clarified but arguably reinforced by the material surroundings in which the ceremonies take place. In spite of *descendants'* efforts to give presence to the pre-war villages through their tangible and visual traces, the ceremonies annually reinhabit and reinvest with meaning the post-war environment of the villages which reconstructed them selectively, as memorials to the battle. Thus parish churches were replaced by chapels surmounted by a *Croix de Guerre* rather than an ordinary cross, the war memorial stands where houses and streets had been and bears the names of the parish dead but also the name and/or image of the village, implicitly equating it to the human victims listed alongside it. In some villages, the reconstructed environment also includes a monument incorporating village ruins erected by the Touring Club de France in the interwar period and bearing the inscription 'Here was [name of the village]' (Ici fut XX). Other ruins are enclosed by forest, consecrated to the French Fallen (see Amat, 2015). Only in one case (Ornes) were the monumental ruins of the pre-war church preserved and kept clear of vegetation: as well as being picturesque, they arguably materialize wartime propaganda about the Germans' 'barbarous' attack against 'French civilization' embodied by its religious and civic heritage (Horne and Kramer, 2001).

Only in the grounds of the 'destroyed village' of Fleury are more recent shifts in the memory of Verdun materialized, with the 1970s rededication of the chapel to 'Notre Dame de l'Europe', the planting of trees in the name of European unity and global peace in the 2000s and a 2008 monument to French soldiers who were shot *pour l'exemple*, i.e. for alleged cowardice. This is perhaps because Fleury is near the Ossuary, the main stage of public acts of reconciliation, especially since the 1984 shared ceremony between French President Mitterrand and German Chancellor Kohl (see Prost, 2002). It is also in this sector of the battlefield that the gradual emergence of a less exclusively 'national' memory is tangibly marked, with a 2006 monument next to the Ossuary to 70,000 Muslim Fallen (part of French colonial troops), a 2013 monument to German soldiers buried by an explosion inside Fort Douaumont, where the German flag has also been hoisted since that date; and finally, and most dramatically, in terms of symbolic redefinition, the addition in 2014 of the name of a German soldier to those inscribed inside the Ossuary, in recognition that the human remains of the missing kept there are not only those of French soldiers but include those of Germans. Physically remote from this part of the battlefield (indeed some of them not visitable except for the annual ceremony) other village sites have remained virtually unchanged since their interwar reconstruction, apart from the growth of vegetation and the recent modifications made by *descendants*. So their landscape arguably continues to materialize the symbolic co-optation of their disappearance and of the privations of the inhabitants to exclusively French, *national* war commemoration.

The association of village remains with national sacrifice and victimhood is also reiterated and enshrined beyond the village sites themselves. Until 2014, fragments of the

village churches and *mairies*, including a roof decoration depicting the French cockerel (a key Republican symbol) were on display in the Mémorial, the museum erected within the battlefield by war veterans.⁵ Ruins of the villages also feature alongside their medals and citations in the so-called Musée de la Guerre in Verdun City Hall, created in the 1920s to commemorate the battle. This display appears minimally updated since its creation and bears little sign of the historical shifts in the memory of Verdun mentioned above.⁶ In spite of its name, the Musée is an unsystematic collection of objects variously associated with the heroic French 'legend' of Verdun, from the military medals awarded to the city for its 'sacrifice' to military flags and citations, images and mementoes of the generals involved in the battle (notably Pétain) and of the infantry soldiers identified as the iconic *poilu de Verdun* (Ousby, 2003: 4), military *materiel* and objects damaged in the bombardment of the city, commemorative artworks and a Roll of Honour listing the French victims of the battle. The 'Museum' most resembles a collection of relics or a shrine, an impression reinforced by the fact that it is not open to the public⁷ and is in the recesses of the rather grandiose and tricolour-draped City Hall. In this rarefied and symbolically overdetermined setting, the display dedicated to the *villages détruits* materializes and enshrines the idea of their 'death for France', exhibiting their medals above images of the pre-war villages conspicuously dated 'July 1914', the month before the start of the war, as if to place them in the shadow of their impending fate. Other images document the villages' gradual destruction during the battle alongside mangled vestiges described as 'the ruins of villages destroyed forever' (*détruits à jamais*) which once again belong to churches (such as fragments of bells) and Mairies.

Both the villages' reconstructed landscape and these displays define them in terms of their deaths for the nation by claiming their physical remains, like those of the fallen soldiers, to the symbolic and political body of 'France' under attack by its enemy. As the text that accompanies the medals implies, the surviving vestiges of the villages testify to and literally embody the physical endurance and sacrifice of the Fallen of Verdun.⁸ Like other aspects of the post-war landscape of the battlefield that survived the destruction, these remains were coopted to the imperative to give meaning to the atrocity that occurred here by the enshrining narrative of heroic death and sacrifice: like the returning vegetation, cast as a suitable material symbol of dignified rest for the dead and hope for the future, so the vestiges of pre-war settlements were reinterpreted as material evidence of the enemy's brutality and correlates of the French soldiers' heroic, and physically costly, resistance. In spite of some shifts in the 'memory' of the battle and of the war in France and globally, over the past century the symbolic associations of the Verdun landscape have been held in place by practices which have their own inertia, ranging from legislation barring from the battlefield perimeter certain activities held to disrespect the dead and their memory (such as outdoor sports and picnics), to the commemorative ceremonies staged with minimal variation each year (including at the sites of the 'destroyed villages') reinscribing and enlivening the timeless association with one date and one date only, 1916. Overall the material, symbolic and ritual incorporation of the former village sites into the reconstructed landscape turns them into mementoes of death, and thus denied and denies the possibility that they might be brought back to life, even virtually; it also framed and frames the villages' 'death' as something to be glorified or at least valued and accepted, rather than resented.

Conclusions

Approximately 100 years ago, the sites of nine villages destroyed by the battle of Verdun were expropriated by the French state and incorporated into a reconstructed environment that was shaped by the imperative to give a dignified burial and commemorate those who had 'died for France' during a battle that became iconic of France's war efforts and losses, a complete war in itself within the war as French poet Paul Valéry put it in a famous speech (Brown, 1999: 113). My argument has been that this has lastingly shaped the meaning of the villages' material remains, limiting their power to make, or change, memory. A century later, the surviving sites and vestiges of these villages have become the focus of memory work by people who identify as *descendants* of the original villagers, who reclaim these survivals as evidence and reminders of past life and lives which had not been part of the public memory of the battle and the war. Through these objects they forge an imaginative and affective connection with the past of these places before they were destroyed by war, and with the people who inhabited them whom they regard as ancestors. The traces of the villages that have survived destruction act perhaps like heirlooms, enabling people to inhabit a longer time frame and give tangible reality to biographies that stretch beyond the chronologically bounded individual (see Hoskins, 1998). This role may be intensified by the material disruptions caused by war and displacement, making it particularly important to ground biographical and familial continuity in tangible, solid things that by their very durability can be as much tokens of survival as of loss (see Parkin, 1999). This may also be particularly relevant and important when direct human survivors of war disappear and objects are perhaps made to take the relay in producing or mediating an affect-laden relationship with past places and people.

The surviving objects encourage the living presence of *descendants* and assist their encounters and conversations which revive forgotten relationships and create new ones, so in a fleeting but poignant way help restore a 'life' of sorts to the villages that 'died' in 1916. However, the ability of the surviving remains of the villages to change the memory of Verdun is doubtful. As I have shown, in spite of some shifts in the military memory of the battle since the interwar period, the village ruins continue to be interpreted as tokens of heroic military sacrifice 'for France'. The very materiality that allowed the village vestiges to survive the battle was intensely meaningful to those who reconstructed the battlefield after the war, not just representing but also embodying the fragility of the country under enemy fire but also the endurance, suffering and resilience of the soldiers. Both spatially and temporally, through the annual ceremonies, the surviving remains of the villages were made part of a new landscape that essentially equated the death of people with the death of places (and vice versa). The reconstructed battlefield was not just a stage for evoking and remembering the battle and its victims: it was a place for laying the victims to rest, not just in burials but, given the hundreds of thousands of missing, through the very physical fabric of the battlefield. The landscape was a memento or embodiment of the dead helping to deal physically as well as symbolically with the losses of the battle. This coopted and transformed the things that had survived the mass destruction: the ruins, the returning vegetation, the land itself arguably became indexes of the dead (see also Filippucci, forthcoming). The space and time of this landscape was, and continues to be, that of national mourning and death, and as tangible tokens of death

in a landscape dedicated to the moment of its violent destruction, the surviving remains of the villages can fleetingly make present past lives but they cannot change the past at Verdun in the sense of restoring to these sites a more layered, inclusive temporality.

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Notes

1. German mourners were banned from visiting the battlefield in the interwar period and their cemeteries were located outside the battlefield perimeter. In the second post-war period, personal visits were allowed but the first official visit by a German representative was by Chancellor Kohl in 1984; I was told that German military officials were first invited to an official ceremony in 2006 (see also Roy-Prévot, 2012).
2. 'Croix' is a feminine noun in French.
3. Lit. 'hairy one', the term affectionately given to the French infantry in the First World War for their dishevelled aspect due to conditions in the trenches.
4. This understanding is encapsulated in a local saying about the battlefield at Verdun, that its terrain is 'a third soil, a third iron and a third flesh' (*Un tiers terre, un tiers fer, un tiers chair*).
5. The display was changed in 2014 for the centenary and, as far as I can tell from the museum website, the section on the villages has been removed.
6. The display includes some items donated in recent times by other 'war cities' such as Sarajevo in the context of Verdun's role as 'World City of Peace' from 2000; however, these are a tiny part of the collection.
7. I had to go through a personal contact to get special permission to enter; mostly, only visiting national and international dignitaries are given access.
8. The citation speaks of the 'avenging magic' of the village ruins, implying that the ruins themselves also incite survivors to fight on to overcome the enemy in their fallen comrades' names.

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